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Rehab plan in the works for Winchester's aging Packer-Ellis tennis courts

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

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The Packer-Ellis tennis courts on Palmer Street will receive an update, thanks to a plan being addressed by the town. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

When a fence at the Packer-Ellis Tennis Courts collapsed, Robert
who was watching a match — was dropped onto the retaining wa

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the barrier. He was mostly fine, but the incident underscored some very real safety concerns regarding the aging courts.

Although he is a Chelmsford resident, Schroff has been a member of the Winchester Tennis Association for about four years. He said he loves coming to Winchester for its tennis community and he wants it to be around for as long as possible, "but the only way that's going to happen is if there's some major changes that occur."

Luckily, there is a plan on the table to address those concerns, though fruition is still a few years away.

The Packer-Ellis tennis courts on Palmer Street bring in a lot of residents, as well as tournaments. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

"Basically, our charge is renovation of the existing courts," said Chris Huntress, of Huntress Associates, an athletic facility design firm

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Andover. "Right now, we've got 15 courts, and we're going to go to 13 courts."

Huntress, along with Jeffrey Koetteritz, a civil engineer with VHB, have been tapped to offer preliminary design plans for the popular tennis courts located off Palmer Street.

Town Administrator Beth Rudolph said funding for the project was provided last fall by Town Meeting. The idea was to do a "kind of a schematic content level design to look at how we can improve this tennis courts facility which is definitely showing its age," she said.

Koetteritz called the area a beautiful site, but said there were some constraints that jumped out at them immediately. They included the fact that the majority of courts sit in the 100-year flood plain and with Wedge Pond nearby, any reno would have to be coordinated with the Conservation Commission.

"And I know it was mentioned already, but I think primarily the issue we're looking at is access, safety and circulation and how do we make these courts as usable as possible," Koetteritz said. "It's really a beautiful, beautiful site and they have a lot of opportunities there."

Existing conditions

Koetteritz, in a presentation to the Select Board earlier this month, ran through a series of photos that showed the deteriorating conditions of the courts. From an aged stairway and an already narrow access point being encroached upon by tree roots to questionable seating and walls that have seen better days, the photos laid out what Koetteritz said he suspected everyone was already familiar with.

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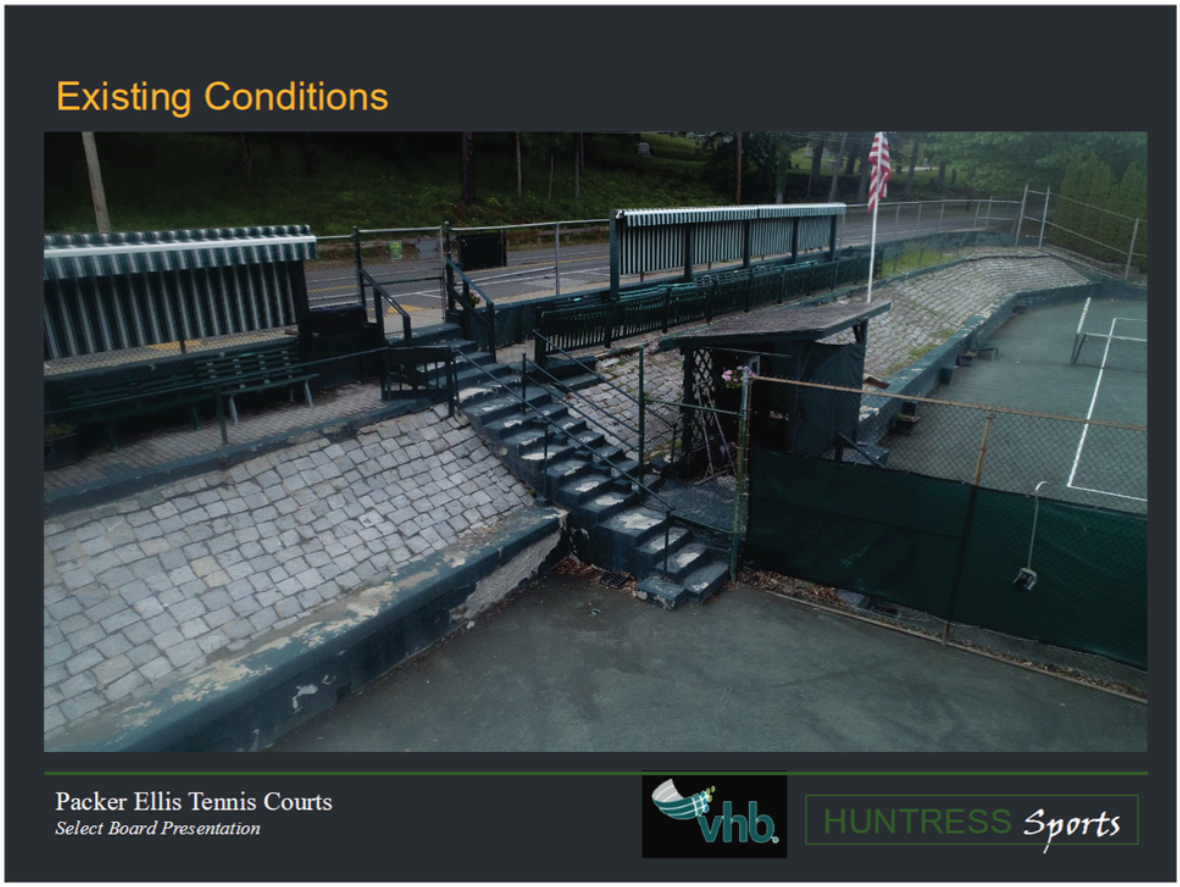
"And kind of just as importantly, is code compliance and bringing things up to current standards," he added.



Existing conditions at the Packer-Ellis tennis courts have some residents, as well as town officials, concerned over safety standards. COURTESY PHOTO/TOWN OF WINCHESTER

Select Board Chair Michelle Prior said it didn't surprise her to discover the courts were out of code.

"We're like the town of nonconformity, so it seems like that's on brand," she said before asking for clarity on how a person with a walker or a like-situation would get to the courts from Palmer Street.

Koetteritz said it would entail a sort of switchback of ramps that would allow people with walkers or wheelchairs to get to the seating area as well as the courts themselves.

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Why 13 courts?

Huntress said the reason for losing two courts is because it allows them to maintain the existing footprint while addressing the environmental constraints and also improve ADA accessibility, as well as improve spectator viewing, coaching opportunities and parking. It will also address some administration issues, like check-ins, bathroom facilities and how people will circulate through the site.

"How do we move buses through? How do we move cars through? How do we move people through?" he said. "Those are some of the things that we looked at."

The way they achieve 13 courts is by taking out one doubles court and one singles court, he added.

The way the courts are laid out now there are four banks of courts with four courts in each of the two middle banks. Huntress showed a new plan that had only three courts in each of the middle sections.

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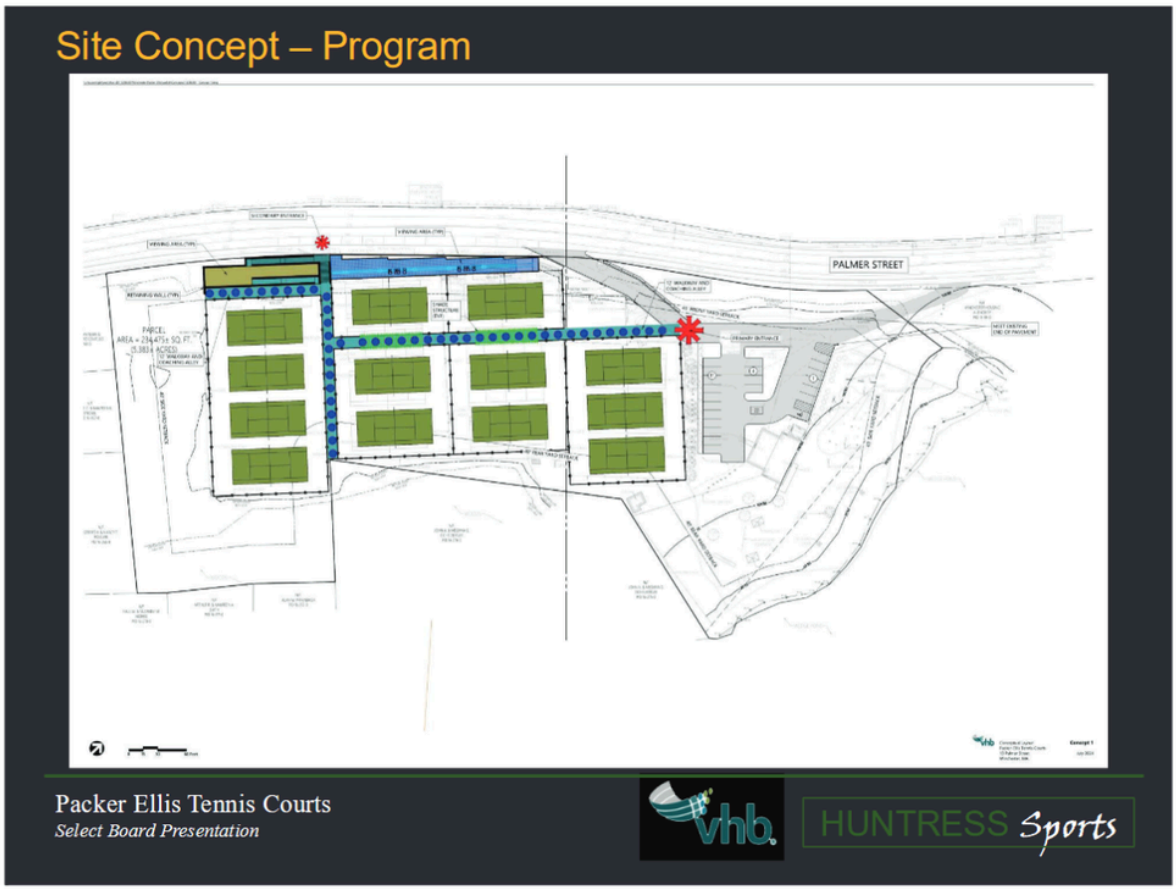

VHB and Huntress Sports presented a new plan of what the Packer-Ellis tennis courts might look like. COURTESY PHOTO/TOWN OF WINCHESTER

The new courts would also be standardized to USTA tennis dimensions. Huntress said by losing the two courts they were able to gain "a pedestrian access and kind of coaching ally, if you will, right through the middle of the courts." They were also able to create a viewing deck with expanded seating.

"The other things that we've talked about were improvements at the main entry, which included a range of alternatives all the way from kiosks for information services, and that kind of thing all the way up to and including administrative buildings space, bathroom space and that would be shared with the parking associated that could serve the beach as well," Huntress said.

Select Board member John Fallon asked if there were any plans t
the retaining wall. Huntress called that a good questions because a section

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of the wall has clearly failed.

"I mean, it hasn't fallen over, but it has a healthy lean to it," he said. "So we are recommending as you go into the next phase, the geotechnical and structural engineer take a look at that wall and assess how much it has to be removed."

WTA thoughts

Chrissy Bordonaro, president of the Winchester Tennis Association, said she had the chance to see some of the possible designs for the courts and is very excited at what they might look like.

Last month on a Saturday afternoon, the WTA held its first U.S. Tennis Association juniors tournament. She called it a huge success with 24 boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 16 years old, who came from all over the state to play at the Packer-Ellis courts.

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The Winchester Tennis Association is hoping the updates to the Packer-Ellis tennis courts will bring in many more people, as well as preserving the community resource. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

"Watching them compete and seeing their love of the game was a truly special afternoon," she said. "Our hope is to continue to showcase the Packer-Ellis courts to as many as possible in the future, but this cannot happen without investing in the courts to ensure that they're safe and accessible to all."

She said the WTA is grateful for the initial funding for the design plan and hopes the town will continue to fund the next phase as well "to preserve this treasured community resource."

What's next?

What's next is still in flux.

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"So this is as far as the money we have right now takes us," said Rudolph.

Rudolph said Recreation Director Nick Cacciolfi is putting together a capital request for the next phase of design, and they're still working out what that number might mean financially.

"And I wanted to hear what you all had to say to make sure we're kind of on track in terms of where the scope is headed," she added. "So the next phase is a design request and then the subsequent year would be a construction funding request."

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